

The Holy Scriptures: Nourishment of the Faithful, Part Two

By His Eminence Metropolitan Saba (Isper)

What, in reality, is this book?

The Bible is, first and foremost, a theological book, presenting the mystery of God to humanity in a practical, not theoretical, manner. God, whose mystery cannot be comprehended, reveals Himself to humanity little by little, progressively. God accompanies humans with astonishing patience to open their minds to understand Him as He is, not as they imagine Him to be. Often, people misunderstood Him (and still do), attributing their whims and perceptions to Him, distorting and desecrating His image. The perpetual sin of mankind is to restrict God according to its measure, instead of raising itself to the measure of God. Therefore, God chose to reveal Himself by using those whom He designated, those to whom we refer as prophets and apostles. However, He began to practically reveal Himself through accompanying the people to whom He chose to reveal Himself. From Abraham, the father of the fathers and the father of many nations, to Jesus Christ, God patiently waited over eighteen centuries for His image to be truly revealed to humanity – yet people still want to perceive Him in their own image and superimpose onto Him their ideas and interpretations.

The Bible is, therefore, a divine book, gradually unveiling the truth of God using the style that is understood by those to whom He reveals Himself. If the book speaks of history, it is to show God's work within it, thus revealing His nature. Let us use the following image as an example of this:

According to the understanding of the peoples of the Near East, when two ancient peoples confronted each other in war, their respective gods were believed to take part in the war alongside them – isn't this what we see in the religious thinking of people even today? So, when one people is victorious, their god is deemed as the strongest; thus, the defeated people worship him, while the victorious offer him thanks. In this manner, the believers of the Old Testament believed that God fought on their side when they won; but when they were defeated, unlike all of the other ancient peoples (and herein lies the divine work in the holy scriptures), they understood it that their God abandoned them because they had sinned. Therefore, they had to repent and return to obeying their God's commandments to win and be liberated.

Thus, God revealed Himself as the Master of history. God used history as a stage to reveal His attributes. When the holy scriptures narrate a historical event, they do so

not historically but theologically – meaning that the purpose is not a historical record of the event, but a religious perspective on the God Who is revealed through it. The protagonist of the event is not the prophet or the king or the leader, but God, Who is hidden behind what is happening in history, or rather, moves the strings of history while holding them all in His hands.

In this way, we should read the holy scriptures as a message from God addressed to us personally – a message telling us that we are loved by Him; that the meaning of our lives and existence is in Him, with Him, and through Him; and that we are called to remove the dirt of sins accumulated on us to see the truth of God as He is.

Anyone who has experienced the extent to which his sins conceal him from God realizes well the way in which human beings pollute and distort the image of God. God's continuous work in the holy scriptures was to constantly reveal Himself each time to the extent that people could understand and comprehend until "the fullness of time" arrived, when God fully revealed Himself to them in the person of His only-begotten Son, Jesus Christ. "And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we beheld His glory, the glory as of the only begotten of the Father" (John 1:14).

God did not complete this revelation independently, apart from man. That is to say, God was not solely the actor and man solely the receiver. Man needed to grow in the knowledge of God so that God could reveal Himself more and more. Thus, an educational program was initiated by God for the benefit of man. This divine program required the gradual elevation of man's spiritual level until it could rightly come to the knowledge of God. The fallen, sinful man, enslaved to Satan and incapable of enjoying the grace of God – whose mind was darkened and divided against himself, his brother, and nature – longed for his origin but did not know it and could not reach it; he could not begin to walk the right path. The solution was in God's hands, and the initiative came from Him.

His first call went to Abraham. Thus, Abraham knew a God Who makes and fulfills His promises, as when He promised him that Sarah would conceive. He is a God Who does not accept human sacrifices, but as seen in the narrative of the sacrifice of Isaac, instead asks for animal sacrifices (Gen. 22:1-19). He is a God different from other gods. Abraham's righteousness lies in his loyalty to God. God did not change much about Abraham's habits and moral concepts, but was content to be Abraham's God, and for Abraham to be merely loyal to Him and His teachings. Thus, God was first known as the God of Abraham. Then, with the descendants of Abraham, He

became the God of Abraham and Isaac, and later Jacob was added. Thus, He was known as the God of our fathers.

This was not strange to the concepts of those days. Each tribe had its god, each clan had its deity, and often a clan had more than one. However, the God of our fathers was different because He did not accept any other god beside Him. He is a jealous God, restricted by nothing: no idol, no image, no place. He initiates and commands, and He is obeyed. He is the God Who makes a covenant with man and remains loyal to this covenant, so long as man reciprocates this loyalty. When man breaks God's covenant, as he often did and still does today, God's response is to leave him until he repents and returns to Him – then He accepts him quickly and resumes His commitments. Even in God's temporary abandonment of man, there is an educational objective. Such a dynamic and vital relationship is unknown in the history of religions: A God calls, and a man responds. Man often falters and disrupts this covenantal relationship, yet God waits for His creation to recommit to the terms of that covenant and resume the journey with Him towards the completion of its salvation. Ours is a God who endured for eighteen hundred years the harshness of man, his narrow-mindedness and his ignorance. Such a God could not be the creation of human beings because humanity was not capable of contemplating such a God.